

Friederike Moltmann,
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Seminar: Relative Truth and the Language of Value

Week 2: Relative Truth and Self-Locating Propositions

1. MacFarlane's account

relativism about truth:

Truth is relative not only to context of use, but also to the context of the assessor.

Context of assessor: may contain any type of element, entirely independent of context of use

more precisely:

A sentence involving relative truth expresses a proposition p relative to an utterance context C that is true or false relative to the world in C and the relevant element that belongs to the context of whoever assesses the truth of the sentence.

examples:

predicates of taste: relative to taste parameter

epistemic modals: relative to epistemic state

to know: relative to epistemic standard

obvious questions about truth thus relativized:

1. traditional view: sentences are true or false even if there is no one who assesses them?

view context of assessment formally: p true relative to t , even if no one assesses the truth of p with respect to t .

2. verify the account with context-shifting operators:

counterfactuals:

(1) a. If x were to taste good, I would eat it.

b. If John was handsome, I would marry him.

c. If John was handsome, Mary would marry him.

counterfactuals: shifts the world of evaluation, not the taste parameter

epistemic modals, other modals:

(2) a. This might taste good (for all I know).

b. Given the chemical composition, it is possible that this tastes good.

modals shift world of evaluation, not taste parameter

temporal operator:

(3) This used to taste good.

Temporal operators shift the world of evaluation, not the taste parameter.

believe:

(4) John thinks (believes / knows) that this tastes good.

context of assessment that of the described agent

- for the 'constitution' of John's belief

- for John's belief to be true?

other cases where the relevant parameter is not that of the assessor:

(5) a. The exit might be here. (E/H/W)

b. Alethe tastes good. (mother to child)

pretence involved (E/H/W)

How could MacFarlane account for those cases?

The speaker's intended context of assessment makes no difference at all for MacFarlane!

apparent problems taken up by MacFarlane

truth as the aim of assertion:

MacFarlane: give up truth as aim of assertion

Instead focus on normative consequences of assertions:

assertions involve commitment to truth, in the sense of:

(W) Commitment to withdraw the assertion when it is shown to be untrue.

(J) Commitment to justify the assertion when it is appropriately challenged.

(R) Commitment to be held responsible if someone else acts on or reasons from what is asserted and it proves to have been untrue.

relativist construal:

(W*): In asserting that p at C1, one commits oneself to withdrawing p (in any future context C2) if p is shown to be untrue relative to context of use C1 and context of assessment C2.

(J*): ... Justifying assertion in a context C2 is to provide grounds for the truth of p relative to context of use C1 and context of assessment C2.

(R*): In asserting that p at C1 one commits oneself to accepting responsibility (at any future context C2) if on the basis of this assertion someone else takes p to be true (relative to context of use C1 and context of assessment C2) and it proves to be untrue (relative to C1 and C2).

What to do about belief?

Standard view: truth as the constitutive aim of belief (shared by MacFarlane)

Relativism about the content of mental states:

- Faultless disagreement not only in situations of conversations (Koelbel)
- Whatever can be asserted can also be believed.

Further possible problems for MacFarlane:

1. explanation of disagreement?

Why can there be disagreement when the two utterances are to be evaluated relative to different contexts -- which of course the two agents may be very well aware of?

2. the scope of the phenomenon of relative truth:

Why do the phenomena in question give rise to a relativization of truth rather than context-dependency in the traditional sense? The approach makes it look like an accidental fact that evaluative predicates and epistemic modals give rise to an enrichment of the context of assessment, rather than the context of use.

3. The account posits parameters, such as parameters of taste or knowledge, as part of the context of assessment that are problematic in that a speaker generally would not be able to identify them in a context relative to which he intends his utterance to be made a generalized version of Schiffer's (1987) meaning-intention problem

4. It disregards a fundamental first-person character of the phenomena

No misidentification of contextual elements possible:

(6) This tastes good.

True relative to taste parameter that I fail to identify as mine.

Additional parameter plays role of de se interpreted pronoun

2. Egan/ Hawthorne / Weatherson (2005)

The view: The truth of certain sentences is relative to a centered world (a pair consisting of world and a center (and individual or an individual-time pair))
 also Laserson (to appear)

Take proposition expressed to be sets of centred worlds?

Self-locating propositions in general

criterion (Evans): immunity of reference failure to error through misidentification

- (7) a. John believes that he is not a hero.
 b. John believes that the person he is reading about is a hero.
- (8) a. John believes that it is three o'clock.
 b. John believes that three o'clock is three o'clock.

Lewis:

de se belief: relation between agent and property

- (9) believe (j, $\lambda x[\neg \text{hero}(x)]$)

equivalent alternative:

contents of *de se* beliefs are sets of centered worlds: set of world-agent(-time) pairs

What to do about assertions, truth of beliefs?

Aim of assertion: acceptance by interlocutors, adding proposition to common ground

Properties cannot be added to the common ground.

anaphoric reference to sentence embedded under *believe*:

- (10) a. What John believes is true.
 b. That is true.

Stalnaker (1981):

self-locating propositions are always propositions

reason:

agreement, disagreement, acceptance of assertion

one can assert what one believes

Use diagonalization to distinguish distinct belief contents

Later (prefix to *Context and Content*): there must be something special about indexical belief
indexical belief states vs other belief states

Higginbotham's account:

(11) $\exists e(\text{believe}(e, j, \wedge \text{that } ag(e) \text{ is not a hero}))$

problems:

- Sharing of propositional content possible even without awareness of interlocutors' intentional states
- self-reference is constitutive of the mental state, rather than dependent on it.

Using sets of centered worlds for relative truth:

$[C \text{ tastes good}]_c$: set of centred worlds

taste parameter uniquely identified by agent at the world (and time)

what is special about evaluative and epistemic sentences:

acceptance always means self-application (see also Egan, to appear)

disagreement: refusal to self-apply

what about aim of assertion as adding proposition to common ground:

here: adding to common ground means self-application by interlocutors

new problem:

How to distinguish traditional self-locating propositions from those expressed by evaluative sentences?

Egan (to appear): pragmatic condition on assertion

presupposition of relevant similarity:

Interlocutors must share same relevant 'location' in the worlds in a given set in the context set.

examples:

(11) a. Sydney is nearby.

Good context set:

set of worlds in which interlocutors are near Sydney.

Set of worlds in which interlocutors are far from Sydney.

(11) b. My pants are on fire.

Similarity constraint not satisfied

(11) c. John might be in Paris

Similarity constraint generally satisfied.

problems:

assertion of sentences with essential indexicals still possible, meaning shift? Different proposition construed for the purpose of assertion

assertion of sentences with epistemic modals, evaluative predicates not possible with such meaning shift

difference between traditional self-locating propositions and meanings of sentences with epistemic modals or evaluative predicates does not seem a pragmatic one.

E/H/W against taking meanings expressed by sentences involving relative truth to be sets of centered worlds:

(12) a. Possible vegemite tastes good

type mismatch, taste parameters that of speaker

(12) b. Possibly everyone hates vegemite, but it tastes good.

empty set of centred worlds

content as function from centred worlds to properties

MacFarlane vs. E/H/W:

MacFarlane's (ms 'Relativism and Diasagreement') critique:

1. MacFarlane's notion of acceptance of assertion is incompatible with using sets of centered worlds

Truth relative to world of context of use and relevant parameter of assessment

That is, context of use provides world of evaluation but not the other element to which truth is to be relativized

2. It is desirable to treat parameters of assessment as separable from world and agent of context of use

in case there are operators like 'on any standard of taste'

Next time:

more on self-locating beliefs

on value, on practical reasoning, on the role of emotions, on older varieties of relativism